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ABSTRACT

Depending primarily on Joseph Campbell's treatment of the quest or hero myth, this paper provides analyses of recent women's fiction in terms of contemporary women's quests for personal identity and freedom. Following discussions of a proposed definition of myth, its connotations, and its use as a literary device and as a tool for critical analysis, the paper applies mythic interpretations to recent women's fiction by Doris Lessing, Marilyn French, Lisa Alther, Alix Kates Shulman, and Margaret Atwood. The depth and the limitations of using the monomyth to interpret women's fiction are outlined, with the concluding section of the paper examining the myth of Demeter and Persephone both as a unifying perspective and as a goal of feminist literary expression. (RL)

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WOMAN'S QUEST IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Myth--what it is, whence it arises, how it operates, how we ought to value it--has been a subject of argument since the time of Plato. Philosophers and poets as well as anthropologists and literary critics continue to disagree with each other on the meaning of this most elastic of words. Used as a critical term by some scholars, it has provoked the ire of a number of others who insist, at the very least, that it be rigorously defined and uniformly applied. A courteous starting point for this discussion ought then to be a selective summary of some of the common definitions of myth, or at least those useful to critics talking about literature.

First, let me try to suggest what myth is before I move on to discuss its function. Northrop Frye reminds us that the Aristotelian term mythos--which meant, simply, plot--is "much the same thing" as what we mean by the word myth. Plots follow certain

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"typical forms" because they depict "typical actions." A myth, then, is a characteristic plot or narrative (which looks out toward the world of praxis, or action) fleshed out with characteristic word-images or metaphors (which look toward the world of theoria, of thought and ideas).[1] Other students of myth would define it as, simply, a narrative linked to a ritual. The ritual is supposed to have existed before the myth that embodies it in narrative form. Some observors--such as Cassirer--feel that the myth mediates between a ritual and the audience of that ritual. Finally, Mark Schorer has proposed what seems to me to be a useful, though risky, definition. A myth, he says,

> is a large, controlling image that gives philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life; that is, which has organizing value for experience. A mythology is a more or less articulated body of such images, a pantheon. Without such images, experience is chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenol. It is the chaos of experience that creates them, and they are intended to rectify it.

He goes on to say that myths don't necessarily support established religion, but "they perform the historical functions of religion--they unify experience in a way that is satisfactory to the whole culture and to the whole personality."[2]

To C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell, questions of the origins, the source, of myth are central and suggest, furthermore, its function. Myth arises from the unconscious--from the collective unconscious, to use Jung's term--and is a reflection of a community's unconscious needs and desires. As is true of dreams on ar individual level, myth is a projection of collective fantasies and fears. In myth we can see, projected, the collective psyche. Malinowski, the famous Polish-born anthropologist, approached myth differently. He insisted on the social and political function

of myth, on the way myth validated and reinvested with meaning social traditions and institutions. Myths "come into play when rite, ceremony or a social or moral rule demands justification, warrant of antiquity, reality, and sanctity."[3] Finally, myth is a world of conflict and drama. Myth shares an end with the art that grows out of it: the realization, in Frye's words, "of a world in which the inner desire and the outward circumstance coincide."[4]

In the course of my discussion, I will be mentioning briefly a small group of recent novels--Doris Lessing's The Summer before the Dark, Marilyn French's The Women's Room, Lisa Alther's Kinflicks, Alix Kates Shulman's Burning Questions, and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing--some of which the other panelists will consider in greater detail, along with a few plays from the earlier part of the century. Both because of the limitations of time and because of my particular approach to the material, there may be members of the audience who feel that I do not do justice to the complexities found in the literature. No doubt this is true--as true as it is of other critical approaches to literature. From this it should be clear that I do not regard myth criticism as the only method of exploring this material. But something in the literature itself suggests the presence of myth, and hence the advantages of myth criticism.

That something is the recurrence of a particular narrative pattern or plot (mythos), accompanied by the recurrence of particular images. Simply stated, the narrative goes like this: the female hero, firmly settled in marriage and domesticity, or at least committed to heterosexual pairing, increasingly experiences her

situation, and the larger world of convention and established social relations that marriage implies, as stultifying, sterile, crushing. Renouncing husband or lover and home, renouncing the support of community and family, she embarks on a spiritual and psychological (and sometimes physical) journey, struggling to free herself of nothing less than the darkness of unconsciousness and passivity. She aims for enlightenment, for transformation, for a completely new world for herself. Sometimes she offers the insight she earns to her community, but in general it is indifferent to or frightened of the new order that she brings.

In its essential outlines, this plot resembles what myth critics have called the quest or hero-myth--a fact which should not surprise us, first, because, as Frye has pointed out, "the central myth of literature, . . . [is] the quest myth."[5] Second, it seems to me that women's collective struggle to awaken from their special nightmare of history would call up its own collective dream, or myth, of hazards taken and survived, of the brutish face of the enemy, of the complacent posterior of the traditional community, and so on. Mass social movements have their myths along with their theoretical underpinnings and their pragmatic policies; indeed, the first undoubtedly serves as a better fuel for revolution. The mythology, then, that our turbulent historical period has given birth to, is partly lodged in the pages of some of the literature we will be discussing.

Joseph Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces is the definitive treatment of the quest or hero-myth. Campbell's sources are not, of course, the fiction or drama this motif later begins to invade, but the whole range of ancient mythology--eastern and western,

American Indian and Samoan--itself. His book outlines the plot of the hero-myth and its important variations and interprets various stages of the quest in terms of its psychological meaning. The hero's quest begins with a "call to adventure," signifying "that destiny has summoned [him] and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown," which might be a forest, distant land, underworld, a secret island, lofty mountain, or profound dream state. Sometimes the hero can blunder into adventure. The herald who "calls" him is often "dark, loathly, or terrifying, judged evil by the world; . . . or the herald is a beast . . ., representative of the repressed instinctual fecundity within ourselves, or again a veiled mysterious figure--the unknown." The hero who, out of boredom, fear, convention, or "business," resists this call, resists it at his peril; indeed, he then ceases to be a hero, "loses the power of significant action and becomes a victim to be saved. His flowering world becomes a wasteland of dry stones and his life feels meaningless--. . . Whatever house he builds, it will be a house of death: . . ."[6]

Once past the threshold of the unknown, the hero must do battle with some or many hostile forces. Sometimes he is accompanied or aided by a protector; but often the dangerous aspect of the helper is stressed, for he or she is, after all, "the lurer of the innocent soul into realms of trial." Again and again, these trials occur: there are more dragons to be slain, more obstacles to be overcome. Not infrequently, the hero fails in some of these tasks. He may be dismembered or swallowed by some huge beast. All of these things symbolize his death; indeed, crossing the threshold itself is a form of self-annihilation.[7] The hero must die to the old world, die to his old self.

Now up until this point, Campbell's hero has apparently been either female or male. This becomes clearer if we remember that even the dragons and giants the hero must battle are images, metaphors or symbols for the pain and fear he or she feels once the past is abandoned and the old personality or psyche begins to break down. But once the hero has undergone the "supreme ordeal" at the "nadir of the mythological round" and hence is ready to claim "his reward," the hero-myth begins to look specifically male. Typically, the reward assumes one of four forms: the hero's "sacred marriage" to the "goddess-mother of the world"; second, his atonement (Campbell hyphenates it so it reads at-one-ment) with the "father-creator"; third, his "apotheosis" or "divinization" (which occurs infrequently in western mythology but which is the reward Christ earns after the disfigurement of the scourging and his final crucifixion on Mt. Golgotha); and fourth, his theft of the sacred boon, which, if he returns from his quest and shares it, restores mankind.[8] The marriage to the goddess-mother (who is, Campbell asserts, "incarnate in every woman"[9] and so is, for the adventurer, representative of all women) symbolizes, in psychological terms, the male hero's coming to terms with--honoring--the female in himself, the female principal in the world; his coming to terms with and honoring love, <u>eros</u>, and so, in a sense, life and the entire material world; and, finally, his coming to terms with and honoring his own unconscious. Hence the hero's integration of the unconscious is often preceded by images of dangerous descent or of being swallowed by some huge monster and imprisoned in the darkness of its vast belly. The atonement with the father represents the hero's assimilation of the world of the spirit and his

mature recognition of his essential identity with the father, who was formerly perceived as the enemy, because of the Oedipal triangle.[10] (Here again, Campbell seems to be speaking only of the male hero.) But whatever image is assigned to the reward the hero claims at the end of his arduous quest, the boon he is given is "intrinsically . . . an expansion of consciousness and therefore of being," just as his quest, though often represented as a physical journey across a body of land or water, is "fundamentally . . . inward."[11]

The mythological hero begins his task because he and/or his world "suffers from a symbolical deficiency." Again, the metaphors expressing this deficiency vary greatly, depending on the complexity and seriousness of the narrative. Campbell indicates that "in apocalyptic vision the physical and spiritual life of the whole earth can be represented as fallen, or on the point of falling, into ruin."[12] The hero redeems his world through his quest; he is "the champion not of things become, but of things becoming; the dragon to be slain by him is precisely the monster of the status quo: Holdfast, the keeper of the past." The dragon or tyrant against which he fights is always "the champion of the prodigious fact, the hero the champion of creative life."[13] Once he is victorious, he must return to the troubled world from which he came to share his new insight, his power. From the community's point of view, his return to and reintegration with society justify his quest and provide for the renewal of the community. Frequently, though, the hero has refused to do this. And sometimes he does return, only to be met with "misunderstanding and disregard from those he has come to help." We can assume this would happen whenever

the hero, far from riding "on the great rhythm of the historical process" because his quest "coincides with that for which his society itself is ready," instead finds himself battling it too.[14]

No doubt the terms of the above argument--terms themselves dictated by the "vocabulary" of myth--seem very far removed from the novels and plays we're discussing today. But we all know that myth <u>is</u> found in novels and plays; the more consciously the novelist or dramatist uses it, I suspect, the more aware we are of its presence and the less it suffers from distortion. In the novel of social realism, or what pretends to social realism, we should expect to see a considerable distortion or adaptation. Nevertheless, the myth is there. Second, the quest, though projected into the outside world through the medium of myth, is really psychological and spiritual; to the extent that men and women today feel the same psychic pressures and conflicts that originally gave birth, in hundreds of different cultures far removed from each other in space and time, to the monomyth, or hero-myth, we should expect to see it in <u>modern</u> imaginative products: in novels, plays, poems. A cautionary note seems nonetheless not out of place. I'd like to claim the privilege of a rather flexible interpretation and application of Campbell's work on the monomyth. All too often myth critics--any critics who approach literature in a systematic way, which is to say, with a fully articulated theoretical framework in mind--find themselves in the position of hammering the bruised and recalcitrant poem, play or novel into the framework of the theory. The best way to use the monomyth, it seems to me, is to let it serve as a narrative structure and series of images and metaphors for talking about the design--and some of the aesthetic shortcomings--

of the literature before us today.

Let me attempt a brief summary of the narrative line of five different novels. The unnamed woman hero of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing not only feels surrounded by a wasteland--labled creeping Americanism--but she is herself a kind of wasteland. Cold, passionless, logical as death, she is an emotional bankrupt. She is called to an isolated and primitive Canadian island where her father has disappeared; she sets out to find him, and, during the course of the novel, finds herself, too. Ginny Babcock Bliss, the hero of Lisa Alther's Kinflicks, is called home after an absence of years to the South, where her mother lies dying in a hospital. Ginny'w world is not a wasteland--the novel is far too comic and ironic for the reader to describe it thus--but the young hero is very much a drifter who attaches herself to stronger, more well-defined men and women, and becomes, for a time, anyway, what they want her to be. As her mother dies, Ginny gives birth to a self: and that self decides not to return to Vermont where her husband and infant daughter await her. Zane IndiAnna, the hero of Alix Kates Shulman's Burning Questions, is nearly as confused as Ginny Bliss, though Shulman's didactic novel has none of the tolerance and wit of Alther's book; both stories are records of false starts. Zane flees, in turn, two wastelands: the hated middle-class, mid-Western town of her childhood and adolescence, Babylon; and later her marriage, which condemns her to watch life from her Washington Square windows, rather than live it. Doris Lessing's hero in The Summer before the Dark, Kate Brown, has her adventure begin when she is offered a job as a translator for an international conference. She has not worked outside the home for the twenty

years she's been married. Her life seems--as is not the case in the other novels--pleasant and valuable to herself. But when the lucrative job is offered to her, she feels "as if suddenly a very cold wind had started to blow, straight towards her, from the future." [15] This wind is a sign of how much darkness there is beneath the surface of her placid suburban existence: the wind she fears blows from the past as well as the future. The central character of Marilyn French's The Women's Room, Mira Ward, after witnessing and experiencing the devastating effects of marriage and confinement to the suburbs have on women, abandons her children, begins graduate studies at Harvard, and lives in a close community of women.

Each of these heroes searches for a self; that the self has been lost, stolen, subverted or deformed by husbands, children, marriage or, more largely, by a patriarchal culture is a donnée of these novels. In the course of finding, or creating, a genuine self, the five heroes go through various trials. Margaret Atwood's hero's are the most bizarre; Kate Brown's are the most moving, perhaps because Lessing is more honest than French or Shulman in permitting Brown to have doubts, to feel loyalty, in the midst of all her anger, to the home she eventually leaves far behind her. Kate lies uneasily at the very edge of disintegration, suffering from a disease she picked up from a young American drifter she'd slept with twice. She is completely changed by the disease; awakening from the darkness, she proudly bears its physical and spiritual scars. Her collapse into illness is a kind of descent into the maelstrom of the unconscious--there the old self is broken down, there the new flung up; it is her passport to the source of power.

The lake into which the hero of Surfacing dives, looking for the signs her father left her and seeing (almost as if he had performed the supreme sacrifice, dying so that she might see) his gently swaying corpse instead, performs the same function. Surfacing, the hero sees all--the married lover who abandoned her, the sanitized abortion in the gleaming laboratory, the fetus-corpse flushed out to sea--all that was concealed beneath the smooth, opaque surface that a lying memory had created. Only her incapacity for emotion--heard in the dead tones of her voice--offers the reader a clue to her loss.

When the male hero of Campbell's monomyth battles his way, after repeated trials, to the zone of power, he frequently encounters there the mother-goddess and/or the father-creator. As I said above, marriage with the former symbolizes the hero's coming to terms with both his unconscious and the female in himself, while his reconciliation with the father represents his admission of identity with the father and his willingness to shoulder the burden of adult consciousness and spiritual activity. Now if the male hero is alienated from his unconscious at the beginning of the quest, the female hero's quandary is the worse: condemned historically to the darkness of unconscious existence, her task is to come to terms with consciousness. Her consciouness must be raised or, put the other way around, she must raise herself to the level of consciousness. But what we might initially imagine as the appropriate poetic image crowning this arduous task--marriage, the assimilation of the male other--is clearly invalidated in these novels by virtue of the fact that marriage has been one of those social facts traditionally responsible for keeping a woman unconscious. Thus only in Summer before the Dark and Surfacing is marriage pro-

posed as a quasi-acceptable end. Kate Brown returns to her husband after her summer of suffering and enlightenment; one is not sure why. Surfacing's hero stands at the edge of a clearing, debating whether to return to her lover Joe; one senses she will, though such an act is even more incomprehensible than Kate Brown's. The hero feels distaste for everything about her lover other than his body; his chief attraction is that he is "only half formed,"[16] like an amoeba, perhaps, and therefore can be trusted.

Most of the heroes in these novels reject union with the male of the species. Unlike the atheletic Isadora Wing of Erica Jong's Fear of Flying, whose quest is purely sexual, our heroes average one male lover (other than their husbands, whom they all eventually reject) by the time we leave them. A little more erotic activity might be healthier; each of these women's lives is curiously virginal. The word suggests a direction this fiction seems to be taking. As M. Esther Harding has pointed out, to the Greeks the word "virgin" often meant simply a woman who was not married; the question of sexual innocence or chastity was not resolved by the term. Thus Demeter, among others, was called a virgin, despite her lovers and her children.

> The term virgin, then, when used of the ancient goddesses, clearly has a meaning not of today. It may be used of a woman who has had much sexual experience; it may even be applied to a prostitute. Its real significance is to be found in its use as contrasted with "married." 17

The virgin goddess, in the ancient sense of the term, was a woman who was independent of men, who enjoyed men sexually, but refused any permanent bond with them, who refused to be limited by them or by marriage, who created her own considerable power and prestige, rather than take it from a lover or husband, who was solely

responsible for her own identity, who was, in short, sufficient in herself, whole in herself--"one-in-herself."[18] To virginity of this sort the heroes of Burning Questions, The Women's Room and, probably, Kinflicks aspire, which is a way of saying, also, that they aspire to the fortunate fields of the ancient goddesses. We are symbolically close here to another possible end to the quest: the hero's awareness of his own divinity.

In the same way that marriage is refused as an acceptable symbol for the contemporary female hero's coming to terms with the male in her and with the entire sphere of conscious activity and thought, so reconciliation with the mother--which, it seems to me, is a crucial symbol in the formation of a whole adult psyche--is refused in these novels, for the most part. It is true that Margaret Atwood's hero has a vision of her mother--long dead--feeding birds, rather in the manner of St. Francis. If the hero's father gives his daughter the power to see, her mother's boon is the power to act. But Atwood's novel is marred by what one begins to suspect is a deliberate attempt to create a "mythic" work. The commonness of the design shows beneath the fancy embroidery. Lisa Alther's Ginny Bliss, too, attempts some kind of reconciliation with her dying mother that will give her the power to act; Mrs. Babcock's "wisdom" amounts to a refusal to be wise, a refusal of any connection with or responsibility for her daughter. This apparently satisfies Ginny, since it releases her from any link with or responsibility for her own tiny daughter, as it satisfies the author. But what it really amounts to is a failure of humanity and love--defeats hardly surprising in the face of death but hardly, one would think, to be applauded either, even in the name of the

liberation of women. In The Women's Room, in Burning Questions, and in The Summer before the Dark, reconciliation with the mother is presented as an impossibility. (Maureen, the unappealing daughter-surrogate of Lessing's novel, is horrified by the mother in Kate Brown.) Perhaps the reason for this is that the mother is perceived by each of the heroes so negatively: she is still imprisoned in the darkness of the unconscious, still imprisoned by the fathers. And of course it is this very incarceration with its attendant damage to the spirit that the hero has embarked on her revolutionary quest to avoid.

For the normal pattern of the monomyth to be completed, the hero, Campbell reminds us, must return to the real world, to the community, from that strange region of power and insight to which he has penetrated. Where do the heroes of the novels we've been considering end up; or, phrased another way, what is the end of their quests? Before answering the question, it is interesting to contemplate the fate of some of their literary antecedents. In a recent essay, Diana Trilling discusses some of the literature of women's quests I've looked at and points out that the genesis of the contemporary liberated woman in fiction is the "heroine of spirit" found in a number of nineteenth century novels, Anna Karenina, War and Peace, Middlemarch, The Mill on the Floss, Madame Bovary and Emma, among them. She argues that the heroine of spirit is "the most treacherous of projections of a desirable female image for it is . . . [she] who has for so long led women into being deceived that their possibilities in life are bigger than they usually turn out to be. . .." The fate of these heroines is different only in degree from the fate of their living contemporaries;

but it is different in kind from the fate of the fictional hero. The hero, Trilling says, "is defeated not because he is heroic but despite it." But "female spirit in itself is the offence, often so extreme as to be punishable by death. . . .[T]he heroine of spirit is killed to placate society: society issues the decree, the novelist is her executioner." Nor does the sex of the writer matter, for women writers, Trilling asserts, have been quite as willing as male writers to wield the ax and waste the spirit.[19]

None of the heroes in the novels I have been examining is executed to placate society. Their fates are nonetheless not happy ones. I have already indicated how unsatisfactorily Surfacing ends. Kate Brown returns to a marriage she is thoroughly disenchanted with and domestic duties made all the emptier by virtue of the fact that her children are nearly adults. Her grey hair, which she vows never again to dye red, is the only sign of the ordeal she has been through. And one interpretation of the title of the novel is that the only thing which awaits this intelligent, energetic woman is darkness. Maureen, who has perversely represented all the free range of possibilities available to a modern young woman, is sullenly preparing herself for the martyrdom of marriage as the novel ends. Mira Ward of The Women's Room has purchased independence, freedom and an academic career at the price of any kind of happiness. She can only get a job at a tiny, second-rate college in a small Maine coastal town. There, alienated from all the other inhabitants, she paces the beach in isolation daily. It is August. "The sky grows icier day by day; it is large and vacant and mindless," she says. And "Some days I feel

dead, I feel like a robot, treading out time."[20] Ginny Bliss strikes out determinedly, having decided to waste no more time and let no one else define her. But it is hard to see exactly how this young woman will survive or what she now aspires to, if anything. She may be condemning herself, in her insistence on freedom, to a perpetual adolescence. Zane IndiAnna, who has never abandoned her children, seems to have the best chance for lasting happiness. Indeed, she's a little ashamed of her happiness, that emotion having been labled by her feminist friends and co-workers politically retrograde. But Zane's world rigorously shuts out men; she lives and works exclusively in the company of other women which, intimate and rich as it is, seems nonetheless like a nunnery.

Perhaps it is still impossible for a woman hero to voyage out beyond the narrow sensibility and limited imagination of her society and, having gained something life-giving but disruptive, be embraced on her return to that society. The elixir that each of these heroes thinks she offers--expanded consciousness, a new view of history, suggestions for a new relation between men and women, and so on--is resisted woodenly by a society even while it perishes of inanition. Or perhaps the cultivation of selfishness--freedom from the demands of family and community--is itself the goal of the quest, which is to say these heroes have nothing to give to anyone else. Again, perhaps the lack of any satisfactory return (only the heroes of Surfacing and The Summer before the Dark return to the community from which they came, and why they do this, or what hope lies there for them, are disturbing questions left unanswered by the authors) reflects the real historical suspension of the women's movement in its fight against a society increasingly marshalling forces of rigidity and conservatism

against it. Women struggling in the last few years to get state legislatures to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment have their analogs in this fiction. Finally, perhaps the readers, the anonymous female (and hopefully male) readers, are the community which the writers intend to change through the adventures of these heroes. The novels, then, are the boon.

The question of the relation of this fiction to its audience raises again that of myth, so I'd like to return to the definitions with which I began this paper. That we find a characteristic plot or narrative in this fiction--the women who, finding her (usually domestic) life meaningless, imprisoning and sterile, struggles away from her traditional place and toward some zone of power, where she is rewarded at last with illumination, a new identity, and, ideally, a whole psyche--should be clear by now; I will soon take up the issue of whether we find the presence of the characteristic images or metaphors in the fiction that would complete Frye's definition of myth. Can these narratives be said to be linked in any way with a ritual, or to mediate between that ritual and the community that witnesses it? Do these narratives, in other words, make sense of any ritual taking place in the actual world? I think the answer to these questions is yes: many women are indeed making the same quests as the heroes of these novels; and millions more would like to. Moreover, this fiction attempts to make poetic, if not political, sense of the deep changes in consciousness and behavior we have witnessed in many women in the last fifteen years to those of us whose witnessing has led only to bewilderment, fear and anger. The quest myth embedded in this fiction, that is, mediates between a form of action increasingly common in the world and witnesses to or victims of that action.

(Major theoretical statements of the women's movement of course attempt to lay the groundwork for and illuminate the same changes; but I am assuming a much larger audience for the fiction I've been discussing than for demanding works like The Second Sex, The Feminine Mystique and Sexual Politics.)

If the novel of the liberated woman clearly does not make political sense in the way that, for example, Marx's Das Capital attempts to make political and economic sense of history, it nevertheless has a political and social function. We remember that Malinowski said myths exist because they validate, justify, invest with meaning and even sanctify "rite, ceremony or a social or moral rule." (Malinowski was talking about the rites, rules and traditions of the dominant culture or group; but all civilizations have had to tolerate--more or less uneasily--competing myths in the same way they have had to tolerate competing groups; and our own civilization, lacking the glue of, for instance, a living religion, is nearly split apart by competing mythologies and the socio-economic forces that reflect them. Thus one large group within a culture can regard as a heresy, for example, the notion that women cannot find complete fulfillment in marriage, children and the domestic life, while another large group thinks it a heresy that women can find complete fulfillment in these things.) What is validated, justified and invested with meaning in this fiction is specifically a rite de passage undertaken by increasing numbers of women.

But these novels have a psychological function as well. The quest myth that shapes their narrative core reveals the unconscious needs, desires, fears and fantasies of the community that buys

and reads them. In fact, one might legitimately criticize the authors of Burning Questions and The Women's Room for being too conscious of the deep fears and desires of their audience, often at the expense of truth and art: French and Shulman hold up mirrors in which readers can see the distorted figures of their own dreams and nightmares. What are some of these figures or images that appear and reappear in this fiction, images that are the poet's equivalent of thought and that, in Schorer's words, assign "philosophical meaning to the facts of ordinary life," thus making sense of human experience which is otherwise "chaotic, fragmentary and merely phenomenal"? In the time remaining I can only suggest a few of them, and I intend less to arrive at a definitive understanding of their meaning than to ask some questions about them I hope will prove interesting.

In the first place, then, the domestic sphere--which includes marriage, children and home--is nearly always a wasteland, whether it is found in the Vermont countryside, a suburban neighborhood, or New York's Greenwich Village. Far from providing the intimacy, security, peace and authenticity increasingly absent in the impersonal, technological, commercialized world most of us live in, it is a prison of solitary confinement (the presence of children and friends makes no difference) to which women are condemned. Even Kate Brown, who is clinging desperately to deomesticity as The Summer before the Dark opens, comes to feel that her home is ashes as August succeeds June.

Second, there is not very much affection for children in these books. The separation from her child that Anna Karenina was forced to endure at the price of half her soul many of these women voluntarily initiate. Those who stay with their children--

half the women of suburban Meyersville in French's novel--stay, resentfully, out of duty. Children are the fly paper that keep their mothers trapped in their prisons, waiting for death. Only Alix Kates Shulman admits, in one of the two or three moving passages in her book, to the pleasures--sensual, emotional--caring for an infant can provide. Yet we see virtually nothing of her hero's children; their only function is to remind their mother of all the life she is missing, daily, on their account. In a scene from Burning Questions sharply criticized by a reviewer for the New York Times, Zane contemplates from a window the joys of life in seedy Washington Square Park below her apartment--the party-goers "winding down," the drunks fighting, the "drag queens combing each other's hair," the lovers caressing publicly because they have nowhere else to go--while she, deprived of any genuine life, nurses her infant daughter Tina.[20a] Diana Trilling criticizes the writers of Kinflicks, The Summer before the Dark, and Lovers and Tyrants for being "incapable of distinguishing between that which is life-giving and that which is not";[21] Alix Kates Shulman could here be added to her list.

If children fare badly in the novels I've been discussing, men fare worse. Routinely they are insensitive, unfaithful, immature, selfish, impatient, intolerant, unimaginative and vainglorious, as well as bullies and miserable lovers. In Surfacing, they've begun to lose human dimension altogether. In The Women's Room, they are, quite simply, monsters. One explanation for this curious phenomenon is that these novelists, especially Marilyn French, are all bad writers. Another is that the men are the mythological monsters of the monomyth: the cruel, dangerous, nightmarish beasts and dragons one must defeat before one can be

rewarded with the boon. Men are, in Campbell's words again, the tyrannical "Holdfast, the keeper of the past," of the "status quo." And having guarded the treasures of freedom, power and enlightenment for centuries, the monsters would naturally put on their most fearsome aspects. One kind of man escapes the anathema of his brothers, however. Generally much younger than the hero and usually a rather shadowy, unappetizing character--a drifter or other marginal type--he first frees the hero from her dreary domestic life. Nothing lasting comes of their association, but her sexual encounters with him, which generally take place in out-of-the-way seedy hotels or borrowed apartments, isolate her from her past and initiate her into her journey. A kind of herald, he appears in Lovers and Tyrants, The Summer before the Dark, Burning Questions and twice (and both times in ironic guise) in Kinflicks.

Lesbian scenes frequently occur in these novels, and lesbian sex is always better than heterosexual sex. Zane IndiAnna goes so far as to declare lesbian sex normal, male/female sex abnormal, and lesbian relationships free of the dishonesty, secretiveness, fear, inequality, dominance, submission, game-playing and power struggle that always characterize heterosexual relationships. Might the symbolic function of these scenes be to encourage women not so much to love each other as to love themselves? Might they be the image of the self embracing itself? For a vision of the non-sexual possibilities of female relationships, we are given idyllic communities of women in The Women's Room and in Burning Questions (Kinflicks has such a community, too, but it is treated ironically as is every other human arrangement in this book); those in the first novel are positively lyrical and remind me, in their innocence,

liberal nurture and good humor of nothing so much as the gatherings of the Pickwickians in Dickens' Pickwick Papers. But at what price are these flowering gardens purchased? At the same price the Pickwickians paid: the exclusion of the opposite sex. We have less a vision of androgyny here (though it occurs elsewhere in these novels) than a vision of a convent. Innocence and serenity are naturally easier to achieve in a convent than on the battlefield of heterosexual relations, but I doubt they are as easily found there as French and Shulman pretend.

What I am questioning here is larger than the aesthetic effectiveness or sophistication of these novels. My question concerns their truth: their faithfulness to human character and experience; their willingness to tolerate--to incorporate--contradiction and argument; their ability to see that, though evil surely exists in the world, it is not the exclusive province of the male of the species; their capacity to realize that practically nothing in life deserves the sanctity of the absolute. Diana Trilling, commenting that Lessing does not examine the choices Kate Brown makes in a sufficiently critical frame of mind, asks:

> And who in our current fiction of female liberation does? The female quest is before all else the quest for freedom and in our universe of absolutes surely nothing is so absolutely absolute as the idea of freedom--who dares to speak of it as the most relative of relatives? [22]

The kind of failures of vision that I have pointed out, that Trilling has mentioned, are failures that Philip Rahv, in his essay "The Myth and the Powerhouse," claims are endemic to myth. Lacking "dialectical freedom"--which, in an imaginative work, one might define as the unfettered and intelligent play of opposing forces whose end is truth and the resolution of contradiction, if

resolution is possible--myth can only imprison the mind in the darkness of conservatism and unexamined assumptions. Rahv feels it is above all the "fear of history" which generates myth, because history ceaselessly ravages the present even while we try to cling to it in defense against chaos. What he says about certain (unnamed) poets, writers and critics might be issued as a warning to most of the novelists whose work I have been discussing, as well as to the readers, like an intelligent undergraduate woman student of mine, who believe that this fiction faithfully reflects the real world.

> To them, . . . history is a nightmare from which they are trying to awake. But to awake from history into myth is like escaping from a nightmare into a state of permanent insomnia. 23

Though Rahv ignores the fact that myth has its own kind of truth--what we might call the truth of the heart instead of the rational, historically-conscious mind--and though his essay contains unconscious contradictions (thus he speaks fervently in it of the redeeming role of history, in terms which are clearly religious and mythic), his comments about the limitations of myth, whether imbedded in fiction or not, help to explain, I believe, some of the aesthetic shortcomings of the various novels I have been discussing.

Having now criticized myth for its blind spots (perhaps it is useful to remember Teiresias was blind), I would like to confound consistency by introducing the myth of Demeter and Persephone. We have the story in some detail from the poet who wrote the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Demeter was the goddess of all the fruits and riches of the field, particularly of corn, and the goddess of agriculture. Originally Demeter's power extended into the underworld;

later those powers were bestowed on Kore or Persephone, her daughter. One day while Persephone was playing in the fields with her friends, she spotted a beautiful narcissus. As she bent to pluck it, the earth gaped open and Pluto, whose name means riches, dragged her down into his underworld kingdom. Demeter, far off, heard her daughter's screams but could not persuade Zeus, who had given Persephone to his brother Pluto as his bride and queen, to restore the young woman to her. Demeter left Olympus in anger and grief and, disguised as an old woman, wandered for some time in the cities of men; it was then that she taught mortals how to sow the seed and reap the harvest. But neither time nor distance could assuage Demeter for the loss of her daughter. In desperation, she swore she would never again allow the earth to flower or bring forth food for men until Persephone was restored to her. The fields and pastures turned brown; waste spaces covered the earth. At last Zeus gave in. Persephone joyously received the news, but crafty Pluto persuaded her to eat a pomegranate before she emerged from the underworld. Since the pomegranate was a symbol of marriage, she could not stay permanently with her beloved mother. Zeus decided that Persephone should stay one-third of the year with her husband and two-thirds with Demeter.

Now C. Kerényi in an essay on the Kore points out that Demeter and Persephone are really two aspects of the same whole. (Originally, as I said above, they were one goddess.) As the corn goddess, Demeter was of enormous importance to the primitive world. In bestowing upon man the knowledge and tools of agriculture, she made possible the world of culture. Demeter is the mature corn plant from which the regenerating seed falls to earth; Persephone, of course, is the seed buried for the cold, infertile part of the

year. In the spring, she blossomed forth from the earth and was rejoined, as a mature plant, with her mother.

What absorbs Kerényi in this myth is the connection between death, marriage, and fertility. Demeter/Persephone is forcibly married to Pluto. This is a sentence of death, too, for Pluto is, after all, god of the dead in the underworld. Later in the endlessly repeated cycle, Demeter/Persephone emerges again in the form of new life.[24] Mankind rejoices. What we can see here, I think, is that what is a boon to man is tragedy and amputation to Demeter/Persephone. The goddess, through marriage, is condemned to an underworld existence in order to ensure the continuation of life. The mother wanders across the earth, eternally lamenting the darkness of the daughter's lot.

I have not discussed Joan Didion's Book of Common Prayer because it has little in common with the other novels except a general sense of loss and domestic sterility. But the middle-aged heroine, Charlotte Douglas, does wander inconsolably across the earth, in search of the daughter who has turned revolutionary, bombed a building, hijacked a plane, and gone underground. Her mother eventually settles in a mythical Carribbean country called Boca Grande; she is inexplicably certain that, sooner or later, her daughter will pass through the area--a kind of world navel to the American woman--and they will be reunited. It is an unlikely spot for such a miracle; it is surely the only tropical country in all of literature that seems almost entirely devoid of life. The ruling class is all corrupt; periodically it begins senseless, bloody revolutions which shift power from one cousin to the next. The human and natural devestations of Boca Grade are even worse than the sterility Charlotte Douglas thought she'd left behind her in Los

Angeles.

She is never reunited with her daughter; the hatred and betrayal the daughter feels lasts longer than it takes for some soldiers, dutifully beginning a revolution, to gun the mother down. What I think this novel and the Persephone/Demeter myth suggest is that there can be no genuine flowering for the human community until the mother and the daughter are joined in a whole woman again. To express this in terms I used earlier in this essay, the darkness of unconscious existence is death-dealing to the woman, however beneficial to the species, but denying the unconscious--determinedly living life solely in practical, rational, logical terms--as modern males have increasingly done, is death-dealing also. Whatever is life-giving and life-preserving--whatever, that is, has been patiently, carefully gleaned by women through centuries of oppression and limitation--must be saved and paid homage to by us. It must not be thrown away, as it is so often by the writers of these novels, as the old-fashioned and dusty furnishings of the unenlightened past. <u>That</u> is to value the world of our mothers even less than men have, and to aspire to the world of our fathers too ingenuously.

NOTES

[1]Northrop Frye, "New Directions from Old," in Myth and Mythmaking, ed. Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 117 and 119.

[2]Mark Schorer, "The Necessity of Myth," in Murray, p. 355.

[3]Bronislaw Malinowski, Myth in Primitive Psychology, cited in Richard Chase, "Notes on the Study of Myth," in Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice, ed. John B. Vickery (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 71. Chase, commenting on Malinowski's theories, adds that myths are never dogmatic and static. ". . . [T]hey are made ad hoc . . . they are not a canon of behavior or thought. The way of life is given; the myths are life grown literary."

[4]Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," in Vickery, p. 96.

[5]Ibid., p. 95.

[6]Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), Bollingen Series, pp. 51, 53, 55, 58 and 59.

[7]Ibid., pp. 73, 91 and 109.

[8]Ibid., pp. 245-46.

[9]Ibid., p. 118. See also pp. 109-126.

[10]Ibid., pp. 126-149 and 155.

[11]Ibid., pp. 246 and 29.

[12]Ibid., p. 37.

[13]Ibid., p. 337.

[14]Ibid., pp. 36, 37 and 72.

[15]Doris Lessing, The Summer before the Dark (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1974), p. 17.

[16]Margaret Atwood, Surfacing (New York: Popular Library, 1976, p. 224.

[17]M. Esther Harding, Woman's Mysteries, Ancient and Modern: A Psychological Interpretation of the Feminine Principle as Portrayed in Myth, Story, and Dreams (New York: C.G. Jung Foundation/G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), p. 103. See also pp. 101-02, 104.

[18]Ibid., p. 103.

[19]Diana Trilling, "The Liberated Heroine," Times Literary Supplement, 13 Oct. 1978, pp. 1163, 1164. This essay was previously delivered as the University Lecture at Columbia University in the spring of 1978.

[20]Marilyn French, The Women's Room (New York: Summit Books, 1977), p. 470.

[20a]Alix Kates Shulman, Burning Questions (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 158.

[21]Trilling, p. 1167.

[22]Ibid., p. 1165.

[23]Philip Rahv, "The Myth and the Powerhouse," in Vickery, pp. 111 and 113.

24 C. Kerényi, "Kore," in Essays on a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Myseries of Eleusis by C.J. Jung and C. Kerenyi, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), Bollingen Series, pp. 113-135.